

Oil blowout calls attention to risk

Production near inhabited portions of Bakersfield is mostly free of mishap, but experts know the danger is always there

By ERIC HSU, Californian staff writer

April 22, 2004

The two-story, four-bedroom house going up on Sunnybank Avenue in Rosedale was supposed to be Jeana Ward's dream home. Now she doesn't want to go inside.

Ever since last Thursday, when a blowout at an adjacent oil well sprayed the incomplete house in greasy light crude, Ward's view of her future home has dramatically changed.

"It's heartbreaking," Ward, 34, said. "This one is gonna stick in all of our minds forever."

Workers were trying to resurrect a long-dormant well nearby. But an equipment failure at about 8 p.m. sent a mix of oil and natural gas arcing above the well. Winds carried the plume southeast for more than an hour; 10 homes were evacuated, and people were allowed back in about 11:30 p.m.

Jeana Ward's situation may be extreme, but it's relevant to the many people in Bakersfield who live near active oil wells.

For many, the image of oil pumps gently rocking away in parking lots has faded into the scenery, but the Rosedale blowout has raised new concerns about the regulation and safety of "urban" wells.

"I have concern about all operations in urban areas," said Randy Adams, district deputy for the state Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources. " ... This is the kind of thing we have to be real careful about."

There are more than 500 active wells near populated areas in greater Bakersfield, and they account for tens of millions of dollars in revenues.

The number of active wells is likely to rise as development creeps steadily toward oil fields at the outer edges of the city.

The well that blew out Thursday didn't release a large volume of oil and gas, but strong winds carried a petroleum mist over an area spanning seven houses and temporarily forced more than 24 people from their homes, according to figures from the county environmental health department.

The blowout created a mess that covered cars, horses and houses, and will likely kill the trees and grass on several properties.

The oil left a strong smell, and residents said they worried about health effects from exposure.

But environmental health officials said the incident did not pose any serious environmental or health hazards. Many experts, including officials with regulatory agencies and oil companies, said accidents like the one in Rosedale are rare and that the industry has a good record in urban areas.

"In general, the industry carries itself in an environmentally sound and safe way, and that's taken very seriously," said Chuck Dobie, a petroleum engineer at San Joaquin Facilities Management Inc. San Joaquin Facilities owns nearly half the active wells in the Fruitvale field, one of the largest in the Bakersfield area.

That's not to say oil production is without public health risks. Oil field operations contribute to Kern County's smog problem and have contaminated groundwater supplies in some instances.

But Dobie and others point out that wells are often in place long before houses or people.

New construction plans in the vicinity of known oil fields must be approved by the state. Engineers check that buildings are far enough away from wells -- usually 100 feet for residences,

300 feet for schools and other large buildings -- and make sure plans allow for access to new and existing wells.

The number of plans being reviewed by the division has tended to increase; the regional office reviewed 81 plans in 2000, 131 in 2001, 201 in 2002 and 190 in 2003.

County land-use ordinances are designed to protect access to oil fields. The county can ask developers to set aside land for future drilling.

The ordinances also notify nearby homeowners of existing or future oil extraction, said county planner Jim Ellis. But Ellis said homeowners don't necessarily have a voice in whether drilling will occur near their houses.

"There are places where oil drilling is a matter of right," Ellis said. "Before people buy property, they ought to know what the entitlements are for oil drilling."

Still, producers can take significant steps to reduce the danger.

For example, when a new subdivision was proposed in the proximity of wells owned by San Joaquin Facilities Management near Heath Road, the company and the developer jointly paid for a range of upgrades.

They rerouted lines to carry off excess gas, replaced gas engines with quieter electric engines, installed concrete retaining walls and consolidated trucking lines into the area.

"There needs to be more detail spent on operations when there are lots of people around," Dobie said.

Another issue raised by the Rosedale blowout is the extent to which older, seemingly abandoned wells can be reactivated.

When Ward started construction of her house, the well next door was idle, and she said she assumed it was abandoned and would be sealed. The house is more than 100 feet from the well that blew out.

Instead it was bought by Nevada businessman Barry Eaton. Eaton, who had experience in the oil business, bought the well and eight others to try to rehabilitate them. He said Tuesday the damaged well was nearly repaired and that he planned to restart it as soon as possible.

Residents expressed concern that Eaton's lack of experience may have contributed to the accident, but Deputy Supervisor Adams said the work on the well was done by a company with experience in well rehabilitation, Oil Well Service Co. Adams also said it appeared the company followed safety guidelines and described the blowout as a "fluke accident" caused by a gas bubble that jammed the well equipment.

The practice of rehabilitating old wells is not uncommon. Idle wells are supposed to be regularly tested for safety, and the state even encourages the revival of orphaned but potentially productive wells.

Still, residents affected by the Rosedale blowout said they won't look at wells the same way.

Wayne Vaughn III, who was building the house with Ward, said he had lost time, money and peace of mind.

They are negotiating with the well owner's insurance company about damages.

"You're gonna take a chance living by these things," Vaughn said.

Pausing to take stock

Earth Day offers the chance to assess our failures and progress in conserving the environment.

By PAT BRENNAN

The Orange County Register

April 22, 2004

Puzzling over the Earth and our relationship to it is an ancient tradition.

The archetypal ancient Greeks identified four elements - earth, air, fire, water - and tried to understand their meaning.

Today, we live in a world far more complicated. Scientists have identified 94 naturally occurring elements, 111 if you count the ones created in laboratories.

Yet, much of our world remains stubbornly mysterious. Since the first Earth Day in 1970, the nation has paused at least once a year to take stock of our environment, to celebrate the ways we've learned to minimize harm and to soberly assess our failures.

In the spirit of that older tradition, as well as the newer one borne of our technological age, we take a brief survey of pressing environmental issues:

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Air

For years, the news about the air that we breathe in the Los Angeles basin, which includes Orange County, seemed nothing but good. Smog alerts and days of unhealthful air quality dropped steadily throughout the 1990s. Smog-control rules imposed by regional regulators - sometimes painfully, from the point of view of businesses - appeared to be bearing fruit.

Then came 2003, and a dramatic reversal. That summer saw a punishing temperature inversion over coastal Southern California. The first smog alert in five years was issued. Air quality was on the decline.

Last week, the region's failure to meet air-quality standards was listed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as "severe" – the worst rating in the country.

The agency that regulates smog in the region, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, accuses the EPA and the state Air Resources Board of a failure of their own: not adopting enough new rules and laws to cut pollutants from cars, trucks, ships, trains and planes, which are mostly outside the regional agency's jurisdiction.

And while the EPA tightened standards for a significant pollutant for public health, ground-level ozone, it rolled back by 11 years the region's date for meeting the deadline.

That prompted further accusations from regional regulators.

"EPA is consistently saying they cannot accept a legal commitment to reduce emissions from given sectors," said Sam Atwood, spokesman for the air district. "And they have authority over a large portion of emissions here in Southern California."

EPA officials say they are working hard to improve air quality, pointing to new regulations on diesel trucks that will take effect in the next few years. The state Air Resources Board also has added to their roster of proposed rules.

In the next three years, the regional air district must develop plans for meeting the new ozone standard. They also will likely continue pushing state and federal regulators to share more of the load.

Planners may have late night on hands

GRETCHEN WENNER, Californian staff writer



FILE: BRUCE CHAMBERS,
THE REGISTER

The Bakersfield Californian
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Two big items could keep county planning commissioners up late tonight: new dog-limit rules and a revised general plan. The topics could draw hours of discussion, county planners say. The proposed dog limits look like this:

* An existing three-dog cap in metropolitan Bakersfield stays the same. That rule affects folks on quarter-acre or smaller lots.

Everywhere else in the county, ownership of canines would be subject to tiered limits based on acreage:

* On lots up to 2.5 acres, you're allowed six pooches.

* For property up to 20 acres you can keep 10 canines.

* Spots over 20 acres afford you 20 dogs.

Those who want more pooches can apply for conditional use permits, said Jim Ellis, planning chief.

The dog law would also add an element defining "animal shelters" and "kennels."

Ellis said the classification is meant to help in situations where people keep 100 dogs, for example, but claim they're all personal pets.

"We're going to have a lot of testimony" on the ordinance, Ellis said.

But doggie friends and foes might have to wait hours to make comments. That's because the commission will take up the revised Kern County General Plan first.

The plan will serve as the county's blueprint for growth during the next 20 years or so.

County planners have been preparing the document for several years. It's the first major overhaul of the plan in about two decades.

People and groups concerned about traffic, air quality, agricultural land preservation, sewer systems, "smart growth" and other issues are expected to weigh in at tonight's meeting.

Dave Rickels of the planning department said the commission could make a decision about the plan tonight and pass it on to county supervisors with a recommendation.

Or, it could send all or some of it back to the department for more work.

The plan is currently set to go before supervisors June 8. The dog limit would also go to the board if approved.

Supervisors approve composting plant

By James C. Loughrie
Sentinel Reporter
April 21, 2004

HANFORD - Stratford-based Westlake Farms received the OK Tuesday from the Kings County Board of Supervisors to process human waste into compost fertilizer and spread it on farmland.

Supervisors voted 4-0 to deny three appeals filed in February after the Kings County Planning Commission approved the project. District 2 Supervisor Jon Rachford abstained from the hearing due to a conflict of interest.

Proposed by Westlake Farm President Ceil Howe Jr., whose family has owned the farm since the 1920s, the plan calls for processing of up to 900,000 tons of compost per year using 500,000 tons of treated sewage from the County Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County.

The sanitation districts are an organization of 78 cities within Los Angeles County consolidated to

handle waste disposal. The waste would be trucked from two Los Angeles County locations.

Though Howe must obtain four more permits for the project from state and regional agencies, this was the final stage of the permit process in Kings County. Howe must have the project approved by the California Integrated Waste Management Board, obtain two permits from the San Joaquin Regional Air Pollution Control District and get approval from the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board.

While three organizations filed appeals to the county, citing issues ranging from land use to the environmental impact report, the main complaint came from a group of Kettleman City residents who live about five miles from the proposed processing site. They were concerned about air quality and chemicals that could come from the sewage. A few residents came to the meeting with signs stating, "Don't dump on me because I am: Rural, Latino, poor, Spanish-speaking."

"What has Kettleman City done to deserve 500,000 tons of sewage sludge per year?" asked resident Maricela Mares-Alatorre.

Comments and questions like this one had garnered a tacit response from the Hanford Planning Commission but supervisors engaged residents speaking at Tuesday's meeting.

District 5 Supervisor Alene Taylor rebutted Mares-Alatorre, saying the county has provided money to Kettleman City for a Family Resource Center and a Community Services Building.

The Franklin Tract Land Owners Association, a group of landowners who neighbor Westlake Farms, filed an appeal through Fresno attorney Richard Harriman. The association owns a 117-acre parcel of land it plans to lease to a duck hunting group called Kings Wings. This will make the parcel a wetland.

Harriman took issue with keeping the land zoned agricultural, which would keep the tax rate lower through state contracts discounting farmland property taxes, and questioned the potential for flooding on land that used to be at the edge of Tulare Lake.

Harriman suggested Westlake Farms use a portion of land to keep fallow, as a buffer between the Franklin landowners' property. But he drew Taylor's scorn when he suggested more farmers should transfer farmland into un-farmed open space for preservation.

"I don't think you have any idea what it's like to be a farmer or a farm worker," she said, in what became a one-sided exchange on Taylor's part.

Jobs were a large issue for Westlake Farms, which laid off 80 employees in 2001 due to financial hardship. Howe has said he estimates the processing facility could create more than 100 new jobs.

Caroline Farrell, an attorney for the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, a San Francisco-based farm worker and environmental advocacy group, filed an appeal based on the environmental side effects from an estimated 60 trucks a day delivering sewage to the plant.

Proponents of the compost plant argue that 200,000 tons, the expected amount used, of agriculture waste from Valley farms could help relieve farmers looking for a disposal method after legislation passed last year phases out agriculture burning.

But Farrell argued that burning would already be phased out by the time the Westlake Farms operation is in full production.

Rosemary Chan, who filed an appeal on behalf of the newly-formed group for outlying areas

within Kings County called, "Friends of Avenal, Kettleman City, Tulare Lake and Stratford," filed an appeal complaining that the Kings County Planning Commission did not represent the best interests of Kettleman City residents.

Chan read Internet excerpts claiming sewage could be more dangerous because of the heating process that takes place in composting. The stack would have to remain at 131 degrees Fahrenheit for a three-day period for the bacteria in the sewage to break down.

Chan's Internet research contradicted rulings from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, which has given the green light to sewage composting as a safe method for disposal.

Composting sewage as a method of disposal remains one of the only viable options. Since the 1990s, sanitation districts were forced to reduce the amount of landfill sewage and dumping in the ocean was outlawed. Land spreading has become illegal in many counties, like Kings, which outlawed spreading of two classifications, Class A and B, of sewage in 2001.

The Kings County ordinance only allows spreading of "exceptional quality" compost, which is the planned end result of the Westlake project.

"This is not just an L.A. problem," said District 3 Supervisor Tony Oliveira. "It's California's problem."

Oliveira stated that composting the sewage, in what he called the "best science available," was part of the partnership among rural farm areas and urban cities.

"We are out there asking them to buy California," he said about selling Kings County-grown produce to urban residents.

High court takes up allowing Mexican trucks on U.S. roads

Carolyn Lochhead, Chronicle Staff Writer

Published in the San Francisco Chronicle online at SFGate.com

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Washington -- Several Supreme Court justices Wednesday sharply questioned challengers of a Bush administration rule that would permit Mexican trucks and buses to begin operating in the United States.

The administration is appealing a Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling that the Department of Transportation had not analyzed the environmental impact of the trucks when it wrote safety regulations governing the vehicles, which have been prevented from operating in the United States.

The Teamsters Union, Public Citizen and several other advocacy groups have been fighting the entry of the trucks for many years, first on safety grounds and now on environmental grounds, arguing that the trucks do not meet U.S. clean air standards.

Mexico has challenged a U.S. moratorium on the trucks, based on safety concerns, which it contends violates the 1992 North American Free Trade Agreement permitting the free flow of trade across Canada, the United States and Mexico. Canadian trucks are allowed to operate in the states, and in February 2001 an international arbitration panel ruled that the U.S. ban -- based on safety concerns about the vehicles -- violated the agreement. Mexican trucks are now allowed to operate only inside a commercial zone near the border, after which their cargo is loaded onto U.S. trucks.

President Bush sought to lift the moratorium, and the administration proposed new safety rules for the vehicles. Congress intervened, passing legislation prohibiting the administration from using any funds to process or review applications by Mexican companies to operate their vehicles in the United States until specific safety requirements were met.

In 2002, the Transportation Department issued new rules to meet Congress' safety concerns.

The Teamsters, Public Citizen, the AFL-CIO, the Natural Resources Defense Council and other groups then filed suit, arguing that the agency violated environmental laws by failing to prepare an environmental impact statement. Several state attorneys general, including California's, joined in friend of the court briefs.

The Ninth Circuit, based in San Francisco, agreed and ordered the Transportation Department to complete an environmental impact statement and determine whether the operation of Mexican trucks would make it harder for states such as California to meet Clean Air Act requirements.

The Supreme Court heard oral arguments Wednesday, and both conservative and liberal justices saved their sharpest questions for the lawyer representing the Teamsters and other plaintiffs.

Justice Antonin Scalia posed the hypothetical case of a "mad millionaire" who applied to the Federal Communications Commission for a license and threatened that if it were denied, he would unleash a flood of trucks that would pour out emissions and greatly increase U.S. air pollution.

Scalia asked whether the FCC -- which oversees communications, not the environment -- would then have to develop an environmental impact statement before it issued a license, "knowing what the result would be of the mad millionaire's actions."

The plaintiffs' attorney, Jonathan Weissglass of San Francisco, said the question would hinge on whether the added pollution were foreseeable.

Scalia replied that yes, the mad millionaire put this threat in writing and swore to do it. "He really is crazy," Scalia said.

Weissglass replied that in that case, then the FCC would have to demand an environmental impact statement.

Justice Stephen Breyer then took Scalia's hypothetical to a more absurd level, outlining another fictional scenario involving the Postal Service. If the Postal Service were in any way involved in the mad millionaire's application, would that agency be required to do an environmental study, Breyer asked.

"The answer is clearly no," he said.

"I take it you're not against Mexican trucks but against a bad environment," Breyer said later. "Does the agency have the authority to exclude a perfectly safe truck because it pollutes?"

Hybrids Multiplying

Thursday, April 22, in the Modesto Bee and the Stockton Record
By JOHN PORRETTO - THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT -- Americans are opting more for vehicles with environmentally friendly gasoline-electric hybrid engines, new statistics show, and that trend is expected to continue because of high gas prices and a growing number of hybrid models.

U.S. registrations for hybrid vehicles rose to 43,435 last year, a 25.8 percent increase from 2002, according to figures from R.L. Polk & Co., a firm that collects and interprets automotive information.

California had the most registrations, followed by Virginia, Florida and Washington.

"People are buying hybrids because of mileage benefits and environmental concerns," said Lonnie Miller, director of Polk's analytical solutions unit. "With the rising cost of gas, hybrid registrations will likely increase in 2004."

Since 2000, hybrid sales in the United States have grown at an average annual rate of 88.6 percent, Polk said, but they account for only a fraction of total vehicles sold. Full-year U.S. sales for 2003 were 16.7 million.

Hybrids draw power from two energy sources, typically a gas or diesel engine combined with an electric motor. For now, the only versions available in the United States are small cars made by Honda Motor Co. and Toyota Motor Corp., but nearly every automaker is investing in hybrid technology.

Honda's hybrid Civic accounted for 50 percent of the registrations last year, slightly ahead of the Toyota Prius, Polk said.

Hybrid sales so far this year have been mixed.

Toyota sold 9,918 Prius models through March, 62.4 percent more than it sold in the same period last year, according to Autodata Corp. Toyota was the first in the world to commercially mass-produce and sell hybrid cars with the Prius in 1997.

Honda said it set a monthly sales record in March for the hybrid Civic, though first-quarter sales were off from a year ago -- 5,982 vs. 6,494.

Because of the relatively new technology, the hybrid Civic costs about \$2,000 to \$3,000 more than a comparable nonhybrid Civic, the automaker said.

Hybrid choices will increase. Ford Motor Co. is set to introduce a hybrid version of its compact Escape sport utility vehicle this summer, and luxury brand Lexus also plans a hybrid SUV. Honda plans to introduce a hybrid version of its midsize Accord passenger car this year.

Ford has said the hybrid system in the front-wheel-drive Escape allows the vehicle to get 35 to 40 miles per gallon in city driving, compared with 20 miles per gallon in a 2005 Escape with a V6 engine. It also plans another hybrid SUV and midsize sedan in the next few years.

Having more choices will make the hybrid vehicles more popular, Miller said.

Ford chairman and chief executive Bill Ford has said the federal government should offer tax breaks of about \$3,000 or perhaps boost taxes on gasoline to spur consumer interest in hybrids.

Already, officials in some states have successfully pushed for incentives to make buying more energy-efficient vehicles more appealing. Others are trying.

Frank Hornstein, a state representative in Minnesota who drives a Civic hybrid, has introduced legislation that would give state residents a sales tax exemption for buying certain hybrid vehicles.

While one state senator has called the legislation social engineering, Hornstein said he believes Minnesota should promote the technology even if it means roughly \$1 million a year in lost revenue, as the state estimates.

"The cost is somewhat minimal," he said. "The state should say: We think this is a good thing and we want to let the auto industry know that we'd like to see more of it."

Governor's plan to retrofit Hummer pushed 'down on priority list'

MICHAEL R. BLOOD, Associated Press Writer

Published in the San Francisco Chronicle online at SFGate.com

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Labeled an environmentalist-come-lately as a candidate, Arnold Schwarzenegger answered his critics by announcing he planned to retrofit one of his gas-swilling Hummers to run on eco-friendly hydrogen power.

"I think that's where the future of fuel will be going," he said at the time.

But seven months later, the high-tech Hummer has yet to hit the road. For the moment, the project has produced more talk than torque.

Seven companies submitted bids to do the work -- ranging in cost from \$40,000 to \$150,000 -- but no contract has been signed, said Rick Margolin, assistant director of Energy Independence Now, a Santa Monica group that evaluated the proposals on behalf of the governor.

"He does have people working on it," Margolin said.

Schwarzenegger raised his proposal for a clean-fuel vehicle with officials in the Hummer division of General Motors Corp., but for now the company is not engineering a hydrogen-fueled Hummer for him or anyone else.

"It's out there as an idea," said David Caldwell, a spokesman for Hummer. "It's not something that exists currently. It's not something you would expect to see in the near future."

He added, "We would never do a Hummer on any energy source that would not perform like a Hummer is supposed to perform."

Schwarzenegger took delivery of the first Hummer made available to the public more than a decade ago, a civilian version of a military vehicle that caught the public's attention during the Gulf War.

His popularity in Hollywood helped transform the brand into a favorite status vehicle. He was forced to defend his association with the hulking, low-mileage Hummer during the campaign when rivals questioned his environmental credentials considering his choice of transportation.

General Motors markets and distributes the latest version of the vehicle, the 6,400-pound H2, and estimates it gets 10 to 13 mpg. Dealers put the figure at 8 to 10 mpg.

The issue hasn't vanished. Activists planned a news conference Thursday in Sacramento to urge the governor to stop driving his signature vehicle, citing its impact on air quality.

Sierra Club lobbyist Bill Magavern said the gas-greedy Hummer "wreaks havoc to our environment" but viewed the governor's promise to retrofit his sport utility vehicle as "largely irrelevant."

"The Hummer is the opposite kind of vehicle from what we would like to see on California streets," he said. "What's more important to us is whether he keeps his promise to reduce California air pollution by 50 percent. ... We have yet to see his strategy."

There was no mention of his Hummer on Tuesday, when Schwarzenegger directed state agencies to work with private companies and research groups to develop a statewide network of stations offering hydrogen fuel within six years: "Your government will lead by example," he said in announcing the initiative.

With the governor working on the alternative-fueling plan, the retrofitted Hummer was "pushed down on the priority list," Margolin said.

[Editorial, Merced Sun-Star online, April 22, 2004](#)

Our View: Policies foil efforts to clear Valley air

Years late and only after the prodding of a court order, the Bush administration has released its list of 474 counties across the nation that fail to meet new and tougher national clean air standards. California's perennially smoggy Central Valley and the Sierra foothills figure prominently among counties with the dirtiest air. Most worrisome, the San Joaquin Valley -- our home -- has become the most polluted region of the country.

The new standards, which measure pollution over an eight-hour period rather than shorter, hour-long spikes, represent a better understanding of how lung-searing smog affects public health.

While the standards are tougher, Bush administration policies will make it harder for many localities to meet them. For example, the Bush Environmental Protection Agency has largely abandoned enforcement of clean air rules that used to force power plants, oil refineries and other high-polluting industries to upgrade pollution control systems when they modernize their plants. The administration's misleadingly titled Clear Sky Initiative, a package of bills pending in Congress, would allow higher levels of some pollutants, would shift from mandatory to voluntary compliance and would push back deadlines for meeting clean air standards, among other things.

Even before Bush, the federal government had failed to impose emission limits on some of the biggest sources of pollution -- railroad locomotives, cargo ships and large construction and agricultural equipment, most of it powered by large, dirty diesel engines. The EPA is set to come out with some new rules next month, but the preliminary indications are that they won't be enough to bring counties with dirty air into compliance early enough to meet current government deadlines.

In California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has said his administration is committed to cutting smog-forming ozone 50 percent by 2010. But that will take money to replace the oldest and dirtiest cars, buses, trucks and off-road equipment with new, cleaner models. It also will take money to adequately enforce pollution laws already on the books. At the moment, neither citizens nor the government seems interested in shelling out more for such purposes.

The report released last week tells us how far we need to go to protect public health from the damaging effects of air pollution. That is a step forward. The next step, unfortunately, seems likely to remain elusive at both the federal and state levels.

[Editorial, Tri-Valley Herald, April 22, 2004](#)

Earth Day thoughts

On this Earth Day, celebrants should be thankful -- indeed, outright joyful -- that one of the most drastically polluting modes of transportation ever known to humankind has all but disappeared from rural roads and urban streets: the horse, of course.

There's no joke intended here, just the point that the unpolluted past was not so unpolluted, after all, and that progress has been made in a host of environmental areas. That's true even if the ranting of some concerned citizens might lead you to think otherwise, to think, in fact, that this precious planet is worse off than ever. It's not. In the rich, industrialized part of the Earth, skies are clearer than in decades, and water is cleaner. And for some time now, we have not had to rely on horses. As a quote in a book called "Challenging Environmental Mythology" points out, a single horse can provide a city street with some 45 pounds of manure daily. Think about thousands of those horses in a city like New York 100 years or so ago, think about an estimate in the book that they were responsible for more than 300 million pounds of manure a year, and then ponder the odor and diseases that ensued from all of that.

Competitive industries are forever coming up with means of employing technological innovations to operate more efficiently, and as wealth grows, so does attention to such issues as dirty air and water. In poor countries, anti-pollution laws can be luxuries that get in the way of necessities.

The sad truth is that some of those who complain most loudly about the Earth's environmental diminution are the same people who stand in the way of fixing things -- who oppose the development of genetically modified foods, as an example. Their opposition is a kind of craziness, considering that biotechnology can produce more on less land, help enrich poor nations and lead to far less reliance on pesticides. If some of these people had their way, we would soon go back to dependence on horses, and to all that manure everywhere. It's something to think about this Earth Day.

[Editorial, Stockton Record, Wednesday, April 21](#)

Yosemite's air becoming more unnatural

Yosemite National Park is an iconic treasure of granite peaks, roaring waterfalls and majestic views.

It's one of the world's most beautiful places.

Yosemite also has a new, disturbing status shared with the Los Angeles basin and the Central Valley: Its air violates federal smog standards.

Yosemite is now one of eight parks nationally with that dubious distinction.

Acting on a court order, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has shifted to more-stringent standards that rate Yosemite's air among the unhealthiest in national parks.

It's a sometimes toxic mix of emissions from local vehicles and distant farm equipment and pollutants blown in from heavily populated coastal regions.

That said, EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt quickly added, "This isn't about the air getting dirtier. It's about our standards getting tougher."

Leavitt is right. The highest air-pollution rating ever recorded at the park's monitoring station came in 1991.

Ozone readings have fluctuated since then, with only 10 days listed last year as a violation.

What's really happened is the agency is getting tougher, shifting from one-hour to eight-hour measurements.

The new standards mark one of every seven counties as a violator, 474 from east to west. Nearly 160 million Americans live in noncompliance areas. The San Joaquin Valley -- reaching from Sacramento to Bakersfield -- falls into that category. It must be cleaned up.

Of course, the results of the new testing made news, but some perspective is helpful.

Yosemite's smog ranking went from "serious" to "severe" between 2001 and 2003. Experts say it still will reach "extreme" this summer, despite an overall decline in pollutants since '91.

Fewer cars are allowed inside the park and diesel tourist buses are being replaced with hybrids.

Every American wants their national parks to remain as clean and healthy as possible. That's why we visit them. In Yosemite's case, part of the problem is found in the nation's new standards. Another is the human footprint: 3.5 million visitors each year.

They should get used to new ways of arriving and departing -- and having a less-mechanized experience while there.

That will make the park's ecosystem healthier. A little more walking wouldn't hurt anyone, either.

[Column, The Record \(serving Stockton, San Joaquin and Mother Lode\), Thursday, April 22](#)

Offering some down-to-Earth thanks

By Mike Matz

With the unfortunate escalation of violence in Iraq, continued worries about terrorism at home and abroad, and a sluggish domestic economy keeping many from being employed to their full potential, today's celebration of Earth Day probably isn't at the forefront of most minds.

That's too bad, because considerable progress has been made since its founder, 87-year-old former Sen. Gaylord Nelson, organized the first celebration in 1970.

Our sky is cleaner, which makes the air we breathe far healthier. Our waters are less polluted, and in most areas, safer to drink. Fewer toxics are spewed into the environment, making the lives of pregnant mothers more healthy and giving young children a better start.

Especially in troubling times such as these, we should take heart in the accomplishments that have improved the lives of millions of Americans.

The laws passed a half-generation ago at the behest of people from all walks of life -- the Clean Water Act of 1972, the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the revisions to it in 1977 and 1990, and the Hazardous Substances Act of 1973 -- have improved our quality of life and made this nation a better place.

We should be proud of our progress, take measure of our success and recognize the connection between our environmental progress and civic advocacy -- the theme of this year's Earth Day celebration.

For four decades now, Americans have been making that connection, using the opportunity given us by another law, the 1964 Wilderness Act -- signed by President Lyndon Johnson after Congress passed the bill by overwhelming and bipartisan majorities.

The act gave us the tool to save some of our country's most spectacular natural heritage, our wild places and scenic vistas that enable us to reconnect with nature and soothe our stresses, soak in the views and savor the sounds.

Nothing could be better to gird us for the worries and concerns of our daily lives, the hectic rushing about along clogged city sidewalks, the standing still in traffic jams, the grind and noise of a society weighed down by chirping cell phones and blinking blackberries.

In fact, millions of Americans do escape each summer to camp in our national forests, visit the attractions at our national parks, canoe across sparkling lakes or fish a clear mountain stream.

We're nearly unique in the world for having the wide array of opportunities to enjoy these pursuits. We have many who preceded us to thank.

From adopting wilderness areas, to restoring historic structures and public landscapes, to leading guided tours, Americans have worked to preserve some of our natural heritage just as it is, as a legacy to hand down to future generations as an enduring benefit.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 provided them the process by which we still are able to safeguard deserving places in the National Wilderness Preservation System. This Earth Day, we should take time to remember the 40th anniversary of this capstone of conservation.

A group of prominent citizens has been formed precisely for that reason. Americans for Wilderness brings together a broad and diverse list of people who share a belief that our wildlands are important and need to be preserved. Many of these people, Republicans and Democrats, contributed admirably, underscoring the appropriateness of being a great American and a great conservationist.

Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter sought and achieved additional protection for American landscapes as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System and are honorary members of Americans for Wilderness.

William Ruckelshaus, appointed the very first head of the Environmental Protection Agency by President Richard Nixon, is a member, as is William Reilly, who worked in the same capacity during the administration of President George H.W. Bush.

These public servants are joined by Teddy Roosevelt IV, David Rockefeller Jr., writer Kurt Vonnegut, musicians Emmylou Harris and Bonnie Raitt, architects I.M. Pei and Maya Lin, and actor Morgan Freeman.

Led by writer Barbara Kingsolver and actors Robert Redford and Christopher Reeve, the group counts among its members Gaylord Nelson and Denis Hayes, who coordinated the first Earth Day.

These people have assembled under the Americans for Wilderness banner to commemorate the foresight our national leaders had four decades ago.

Thanks to this landmark law, wonderful places such as California's Golden Trout Wilderness, New Mexico's Gila Wilderness, Glacier Peak in Washington and Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness have remained pristine and largely the same as when Lewis and Clark observed them two centuries ago.

What a fabulous gift for our children.

Amid the trouble and conflict in the world, the wilderness we've saved certainly is something worth celebrating on Earth Day.

So, find a trail and stroll through the woods, leave the cell phone behind and listen to the chirping birds, watch a burbling stream and take pride in something we have given the next generation to similarly seek solace in during difficult times.

Matz is executive director of the Campaign for America's Wilderness. Readers can write to him at 122 C St. NW, Suite 240, Washington D.C. 20001; or online at www.leaveitwild.org. He wrote this for Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service.

[Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star, April 22, 2004](#)

Drop this racetrack idea now

Editor: I have a bet going that the Sun-Star will not print this letter. Why? Because I know a number of people who have written on the same topic and the Sun-Star has somehow "lost" their letters. Despite that fact, the word is finally getting out about the proposed raceway in Merced County. It has been a close-kept secret for more than two years. The Sun-Star is participating in this cover-up. Why? I can only guess that it wants to keep the public ignorant of the facts until it deems the project is a done deal.

The Riverside Motorsports Complex is a massive project proposed on agricultural land inside the former Castle Air Force Base. This billion-dollar (yes, I said B for billion-dollar) boondoggle will feature eight and possibly up to 15 racetracks that will be used 365 days of the year for an estimated 400,000 to 535,000 people per year. Who couldn't help but see dollar signs with those figures?

The down side? In simple language that we can all understand, the air quality in the San Joaquin Valley has already been charted as some of the worst in the nation. Well, guess what? Vehicle exhaust pollutes the air and causes similar health problems as cigarette smoking.

Rubber from the tires when brakes are applied and parking and driving in dirt puts particulates in the air that would undoubtedly cause much worse problems than our local family farmers are being blamed for.

And what about the noise? Just type "noise pollution" on your computer's search engine and you can find a plethora of information. From "How Stuff Works": Any sound above 85 decibels (dB) can cause hearing loss, and the loss is related both to the power of the sound as well as the length of exposure. Eight hours of 90-dB sound can cause damage to your ears; any exposure to 140-dB sound causes immediate damage (and causes actual pain)."

The Laguna Seca racetrack in Monterey has a 92 dB noise limit at 50 feet. It has only one racetrack. Imagine the noise eight to 15 racetracks can generate! Can you guess what else the tracks will be used for? How about rock concerts? (I kid you not!) The dB level for rock concerts is about the same as a jet engine at 120dB.

I ask you, how in the world can our present infrastructure in Merced County support an estimated 42,000 more vehicles traveling on our roads per year? You think we have it bad now? Just wait!

This is not just a problem for Atwater; it will impact the whole San Joaquin Valley. So wake up and smell the coffee while there is still time, Merced County!

ANNETTE ALLSUP

[Letter to the Editor, Los Angeles Times, April 22, 2004](#)

Attack the Real Causes of L.A. Air Pollution

Re "EPA Gets Tough on Areas With Poor Air Quality," April 16: I recently had a smog check for my 1994 automobile, in order to renew the license tags. The measured pollution was negligible. Autos 10 years old or less must be totally abused to fail the smog check, as they have efficient-burning engines in addition to catalytic converters. Since most autos on our highways are 10 years old or less, they are not the cause of L.A. Basin smog. The real polluters are stationary, such as chemical plants, refineries and manufacturing plants that use oil as their energy source.

We can beat the smog problem only if businesses are mandated to burn natural gas at all times instead of just during third-stage smog alerts. If Pittsburgh, Pa., cleaned up its act more than 40 years ago, Los Angeles should be able to do it today.

Paul Bernstein

Beverly Hills

[In political news addressing air quality:](#)

Web check shows where candidates stand on issues

The Bakersfield Californian

April 22, 2004

Section: Eye Street

Stances of presidential candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry on social issues:

ABORTION

Bush: Anti-abortion, for the banning of partial-birth abortions, against most abortions rights, against federal funding for abortion programs. Has a history of appointing like-minded judges to lower courts.

Kerry: Pro-choice, for federal funding of abortion programs and abortion counseling in federally funded clinics. Says he'll nominate pro-choice judges to the Supreme Court.

GUN CONTROL

Bush: Supports gun ownership rights, favored by NRA.

Kerry: Supports gun control legislation, and increasing gun ownership regulation.

DEATH PENALTY

Bush: Favors the death penalty. Former governor of Texas, the state with the highest number of recorded executions.

Kerry: Opposes the death penalty, believes it is applied unfairly.

GAY MARRIAGE

Bush: Strongly opposes gay marriage, supports a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

Kerry: Opposes gay marriage, supports full marriage rights to homosexual couples but does not believe a certificate of marriage should be awarded. Voted against the Defense of Marriage Act.

EDUCATION

Bush: Supports the No Child Left Behind Act, which emphasizes using test scores as a tool to evaluate schools' performances and holds schools nationwide to a uniform set of standards.

Kerry: Believes No Child Left Behind is poorly managed and underfunded, thinks that schools should be evaluated based on criteria other than test scores, such as graduation rates and student attendance.

ENERGY

Bush: Favors more energy production, relying on traditional sources such as oil, gas and coal. Favors drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Kerry: Supports the use of renewable forms of energy, such as wind, solar and hydro-electric power. Opposed drilling in the refuge.

ENVIRONMENT

Bush: Opposes mandatory lowering of carbon dioxide emissions. Supports Healthy Forests initiative allowing more logging.

Kerry: Opposes the Clear Skies act, which he believes is not restrictive enough and allows more pollution than the current policy. Supports the existing Clean Air Act and says he will reverse the Clear Skies Act.

SOURCES: georgebush.com and johnkerry.com -- compiled by Halley Gardner, 18, Centennial High